

Interpreting John 14.6 in a Religiously Plural Society

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Why we need to consider John 14.6.

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” This well-known and easily remembered verse in John’s gospel has played a significant role in Christian spirituality, theology, and missiology over many centuries. This text, along with Matt.28.18-19, provided the biblical inspiration of the 18th and 19th Century missionary expansions into Asia, Africa and Latin America. Even today, many Christians are convinced that these biblical passages provide the rationale and the mandate for the evangelistic task of the church.

At the same time, there is new interest among Christians on questions of religious plurality, of dialogue among peoples of different religious traditions, and on ways in which persons and communities can work together on the many issues that cut across all communities. The experience of living in closer proximity with others has also brought in new appreciation of the religious life of others. Many are reluctant to dismiss or stand in judgment on other ways of being and believing.

This reality presents us with a difficult question. What can we do with such a clear and unequivocal assertion in the Bible that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life, and that no one can come to God except through him? Are we to disregard the Bible and its teachings?

The Bible is at the center of the spiritual and liturgical life of all Christians. Much of Protestant theology also draws its primary inspiration from the scriptures. The Protestant movement itself began with Luther’s insistence on ‘sola scriptura’; other reformers followed his lead, taking the Bible as the primary source of theology. Karl Barth, whose writings still have great impact on Protestant theology, fortified the place of scripture with his ‘Theology of the Word of God.’ Methodism was built on the studying the scriptures in small groups and on spreading ‘scriptural holiness’ in all the land.

Scripture has also been at the heart of the Missionary Movement. Translating, printing and distributing of the whole or parts of the Bible constitute the biggest missionary endeavor to this day. At the third World Mission Conference at Tambaram, Madras, in 1938, Hendrik Kreamer, the Dutch missiologist, developed the concept of ‘Biblical Realism’ about the nature of human predicament. He made this the basis for the negative evaluation of all religious traditions and of the need of all human beings to directly hear and respond to the challenge of the Gospel. Much of the congregational faith is rooted in the Bible.

Therefore, any effort to bring about a change in people’s attitude to other religious traditions should also take the Bible seriously and seek to face those passages in the Bible

that do teach, or have been interpreted as teachings, attitudes that are dismissive of other religious traditions. The passage related to John 14.6 is perhaps the most well known of these passages. It is important to look at this passage from the perspective of our new awareness of plurality and the new dimensions of our life with peoples of other religious traditions.

The problems in dealing with John 14.6.

The fundamental problem in dealing with John 14.6, however, is that there is no agreement among Christians on how to read and interpret the scriptures. The Bible is generally considered the 'Word of God'. Karl Bart helpfully explains the three ways in which the phrase 'Word of God' functions in Christian thinking. In the first instance, Jesus is the Word of God. John begins his Gospel with the announcement that it is the Word that was in the beginning and through which all things were created that "became flesh and dwelt among us." (1.14). Second, the Bible is the Word of God in so far as it witnesses to the Word made flesh and is the source and inspiration of the Word (the Gospel message) that is proclaimed.

But many Christians treat the Bible as the 'words' of God with a variety of theories of inspiration of scripture. In some circles these theories of inspiration have been further elaborated into theories of 'inerrancy' and 'infallibility' of scriptures. Therefore, some strands within Christian tradition would resist historical and other critical hermeneutical principles being applied to the reading of the scriptures. Despite the many contradictions and errors in the Bible, they would insist that a literal way of reading the scriptures is the only valid way of understanding its message.

One of the helpful ways of approaching this issue is to enable Christians to become more familiar with the way the scriptures are read and interpreted within the Jewish tradition. Jesus himself belonged to this tradition. Within Judaism arguments, disagreements, and plurality of interpretations are deemed absolutely necessary to understand the words spoken and written many centuries ago. Therefore, the 'Written Torah' (the five Books of Moses) and the 'Oral Torah' (their interpretation through the centuries, preserved in the Talmud) are part and parcel of the one scripture.

While some Christians are troubled by the possibility of more than one interpretation of a scriptural verse, the Jews are delighted by it, because plurality of interpretations of a verse, in their thinking, would throw so much more light on that verse. This attitude to scripture is also built on the belief that no one can ever hope to have the full and final understanding of a scriptural text because the human mind can never exhaust the fullness of the meaning of scriptures. Therefore the generations to come would find even more treasures as they seek to interpret the scriptures for their own times and contexts.

Therefore, even though some would frown at the idea of holding a whole conference to delve into the depths of John 14.6, one must insist that such an endeavor is very much in the spirit in which the scriptures were searched in the tradition of those who wrote them.

Exploring the Text

We are in the process of exploring this text for a specific reason: What has this text to say about Christian understanding and approach to peoples of other religious traditions? Today we have a new awareness of many of our neighbours as peoples who pray, believe, and have long spiritual histories of their own. We are often moved by their intense devotion to God and exemplary ethical lives. We have also become aware that the proclamation of the Gospel does not always lead to people choosing to become part of our community. Many have heard the Gospel and have not chosen to become Christians because they find a life in God in their own traditions that already gives them meaning and purpose.

More importantly, we are aware today that we need to work and live in a pluralistic society in which mutual trust and understanding among religions has become a necessary ingredient of our search for peace and harmony. There is, for example, a growing awareness of how different religions speak about humanity's relationship to the natural world. Conversation among religions is seen as one of the essential steps in facing the impending ecological crisis.

It is in this context that we are faced with Biblical texts like Matthew 28.18-19 that calls us to go out into all the world and preach the Gospel. John 14.6 appears to give the rationale for this activity. "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." At first sight, it appears to be unambiguous and clear. If Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life, and if no one can indeed come to the Father except through him, Christians have the obligation to open this 'only way' to neighbours of other faith traditions. By implication this would also mean that all other ways that humankind has used to reach God are defective or inadequate.

How does one deal with the dilemma presented by this text? I think that we need to look at this text from several angles- hermeneutical, exegetical, theological, missiological and spiritual. What follows are brief indications of the points of entry that might be made from each of these angles. In so doing I have chosen not so much to address biblical scholars and theologians but Christians in our pews that are caught in the middle of a genuine search for a new relationship with their neighbours and biblical verses that appear to be uncompromising in their missionary fervor.

Principles of interpreting a biblical text.

Much of the material in the New Testament was written some two thousand years ago. And they were written by a number of authors, living in different life situations and holding a variety of views on how to understand the great mystery of the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth and especially of their experience of him as the Risen One. It should come as no surprise that the eyes of faith and the lenses of cultures and traditions influenced the responses to the risen reality of Christ. It is also known that the Gospels,

and especially John's Gospel, were written several decades after the events. It is no wonder, therefore, that if they were to be treated as strictly historical accounts there are considerable discrepancies in the Gospels. To take only one example, the Synoptic Gospels places the 'cleansing of the temple' as one of the last public acts in Jesus' ministry, as the one that precipitated the plot to put Jesus to death. John, on the contrary, places the 'cleansing of the temple' right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry and introduces the raising of Lazarus as the event that troubled Jesus' adversaries.

Centuries of biblical scholarship has used numerous tools to seek to arrive at a definitive text from among the many manuscripts with variant readings (textual criticism), to determine the character and nature of the material in the gospels (source, form and literary criticism) and to seek to understand the intension of the authors in the way they have written up, arranged and interpreted that material that were available (redaction criticism). Several additional tools of criticism have been used to get at the meaning of the message of the gospel writers.¹

Much light has also been thrown on the study of the gospels by the examination of extra canonical writings about Jesus (including other 'gospels' that were excluded from the canon), of historical accounts by other contemporary writers, and what we know from archeological discoveries from that period. There is much, in fact, too much material to be considered for a full interpretation of John's Gospel and its background. I would lift up here few factors that should guide us as we look at this text.

The purpose and scope of St. John's Gospel.

First, and perhaps the most important fact that one should be aware, is that the Gospels were not written to inform people who did not know the story of Jesus, or as evangelical tools to spread the Gospel message to people of other religious traditions. On the contrary, the Gospels were written to believing communities who already knew the story of Jesus. They are, therefore, attempts to both recount events as well as to *interpret* them to the readers. John does not set out to give a historical account of what Jesus did and said. His interest in *interpreting* Jesus for his readers is clearly and unambiguously seen in the way he begins the Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... and the Word became flesh and lived among us." Here John is surely not making a historical statement but an interpretation of who Jesus was in his perception. His interpretation of Jesus is both profound and fascinating and would enable his readers to celebrate and enrich their faith in Jesus Christ.

¹ In more recent times the New Testament field has seen additional types of criticism as, Canonical Criticism, Rhetorical Criticism, Social-Scientific Criticism, Structural Criticism, Narrative Criticism, Reader-Response Criticism, Poststructuralist Criticism, Psychoanalytic Criticism, Feminist/Womanist Criticism, Ideological Criticism etc. all attempting to get to the meaning of the text from a great variety of points of approach. See: Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes (Eds.) *To Each Its Own Meaning*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999).

This attempt to use a version of the story of Jesus' earthly life to interpret the *meaning* of Jesus as the Christ to his Christian readers permeates the whole of the Gospel.

In so doing, John appears to take considerable liberty in the way he casts Jesus as a teacher. All three synoptic Gospels present Jesus as a rabbi, a teacher, who used parables, sayings and stories that were intended to reach the ordinary people ('the crowds') who followed him.² Jesus' stories and illustrations are drawn from nature ("Look at the birds of the air..."), ordinary events in daily life ("A man went out to hire labourers for his vineyard..."), and from experiences in human relationships ("And the younger son said to his father..."). In fact, the synoptic writers present him as someone who expected people to draw their own conclusions on the stories he was telling them. "Those who have ears to hear let them hear" - this seems to be the portrayal of Jesus in Matthew, Mark and Luke.

But Jesus in John goes into long theological discourses about himself. While Mark gives the story of the feeding of the multitude, John would follow it with a discourse on the Bread of Life, where Jesus would claim himself to be the Bread of Life that has come down from heaven to supersede the manna that Moses had given them in the desert. At every turn of events John presents Jesus as making discourses about himself as the Bread of Life, Water of Life, the True Vine, the Good Shepherd, the Resurrection and the Life etc. John also liberally uses the "I AM", which God uses in the encounter with Moses in the burning bush, to fortify his conviction that the "Word was with God, and the Word was God."

Who was Jesus? Was he a Galilean teacher, or one who expounded theological discourses on who he was in relation to God? No intelligent reader of the Bible would miss the dramatic differences in the portrayal of Jesus between the synoptic Gospels and John. One cannot expect Jesus of Mark's Gospel who (in Mark's presentation) insists on calling himself the 'Son of Man', and restrains those who recognized him as Messiah to silence ('Messianic Secret'), to make the declaration: "I am the Bread of Life that came down from heaven." It would be completely out of character with the Jesus that Mark presents.

It is perhaps reasonable to assume that the synoptic gospels (while each giving their own *interpretation* of who Jesus is) appear to give a more reliable picture of the kind of teacher Jesus was. We have to assume then that John, while building on a historical account of Jesus, is more interested in celebrating with the believing readers his understanding of who Jesus was. This does not make John's gospel any less interesting or valuable. In fact it is one of the richest treasures of the Christian tradition.

In this context John 14.6, where Jesus is presented as saying, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me", must also be seen as the Johannine celebration of the Christian faith. No Christian should have any difficulty with

² There are also many portrayals of Jesus today as a reformer, prophet, a wandering cynic type of teacher, miracle worker and so on showing how the same body of material can be looked at from a variety of angles.

such celebration of faith of the one who had in fact become for them the Way, the Truth and the Life. But what relevance and place would such a celebration of faith have in our witness to Jesus Christ in a pluralistic society? This is a question to which we would return.

We need to hold this question for a while because the considerations above would raise an important issue to many Christians about the nature of the saying itself, namely, whether Jesus actually said these words or not. “If Jesus has said it, who are we to question it?” some would ask, “And if he has not actually said it, how reliable are the Gospels; on what basis can we hold them as scriptures?”

Did Jesus actually say the words of John 14.6?

To many Christians the very question would create difficulty. They would say that such questions undermine the authority of the scripture. But would intelligent study of scriptures undermine its authority? Part of the problem here lies in the gulf that still exists in most places between the seminary and the pulpit, and our failure to find appropriate and creative ways of integrating New Testament scholarship into the teaching and preaching ministry of the church. Surely, God does not expect Christians to be ‘blind believers’.

Any intelligent reader of the Bible would realize that the Bible is full of creative literary approaches in the way it presents the story of the Jewish people and of the Christian community that emerged from it. In the Genesis 3 story of the “fall” of humankind there are many detailed conversations between Adam, Eve, the serpent, and God. Even though the story gives exact conversations with very precise words, there was no one there in the beginning of creation to listen and record them. It is obvious that a literary tool is being used here that includes full-blooded conversations to tell an important truth about the human condition. The fact that the narrative style presents it as an ‘event,’ with characters and conversations does not mean that the ‘event’ actually took place. Every Jewish reader of Genesis 3 understands that he or she is here not dealing with history. At the same time, the literary form (story, saga, or myth) that is used enables him or her to understand the truth about the human condition that an essay of a thousand words would not do.

In the same manner, much of what the prophets had to say to the nation begins with “Thus says the Lord God of Israel.” A closer examination would show that it is the prophet who is speaking in the name of the Lord. The Jewish reader understands that it is the prophet’s voice. For them it is not a problem that he speaks as if the Lord were speaking because everyone understands the convention. Thus, within the literary styles used in the Hebrew tradition, it is permissible to put words even into God’s mouth. There is no deception here, and the convention is present in the Johannine narratives as well.

In the John’s story of the meeting between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, the text says that the two of them were by themselves at the well because the disciples had gone into the village to buy bread. Yet, detailed account of conversations mark the encounter

between Jesus and the woman. Unless Jesus himself or the woman had given all the details of their conversation (including Jesus' discourse on the Water of Life), to someone and that had been faithfully preserved and handed down to John many decades later, John would have no way of knowing exactly what conversation took place between Jesus and the woman. And yet, for John's readers it is a 'true' story, and all the conversation that is written up has rich meaning at another level of understanding.

Historical accuracy of events and conversations is a modern problem. Ancient people looked for *meaning*. In the Hindu tradition, whether the Bhagavad-Gita was given in an actual historical situation would be a moot question; it has little significance to the value of the Gita. In the African and Native American traditions the question is not whether the stories are true, but whether the stories are telling the truth.

What does all this amount to? Are we to consider biblical material to be completely fictitious and devoid of any reliable information?

The Quest for the Historical Jesus.

What we can actually know about the Jesus of history has preoccupied New Testament scholarship for many centuries. The 'quest' for the 'Historical Jesus' itself is a long story and is said to have gone through four or five phases.³ Today the search for the historical Jesus takes place in a widely known process called the "Jesus Seminar." The crux of the problem is this: If the New Testament writers are writing to believing communities and are motivated primarily to give shape to the 'Christ of Faith', how far can we expect them to be presenting the 'Jesus of History'? In other words, if the evangelists are primarily interested not to write history but statements of faith, how much freedom did they take in the way they presented the story of Jesus?

No doubt, there are a great variety of opinions on the historicity of the materials in the four Gospels. Some have argued that we have hardly any sayings that can be directly attributed to Jesus himself. Others have tried to build up a historical profile of Jesus based on the passages that are most likely to include actual events and teachings. I would venture to suggest three principles that have guided my own approach to this problem:

First, it is reasonable to believe that because of the distance in time between the events and the writings, and because the gospels were written by the four evangelists to make their own input into the significance of Jesus for our faith, the evangelists do not give us an *exact* historical account of what Jesus did and said, even when they attribute words directly to him. This is natural and normal within the tradition, and it would not have in any way devalued their accounts in the eyes of their readers.

³ According to Gerd Theissen and Annette Mertz they include the initial impulses towards the question by H.S. Reimarus (1694-1768 and D. F. Strauss (1808-1874), the attempt to break out of the imprisonment of Christ in dogma by H.J. Holtzmann (1832-1910), the counter movement to theological liberalism by A. Schweitzer, R. Bultmann, M. Dibelius and those who followed this line of thinking, the 'new quest' led by Kasemann, Bornkamm and others and the 'third quest' led by Sanders, Vermes, Theissen and others. See: *the Historical Jesus- a Comprehensive Guide*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998) p.1-15.

Second, even though the evangelists took such freedom, there is reason to believe that between the three synoptic Gospels we have a reasonably reliable account of the life of Jesus, the primary foci of his teachings and ministry, and in many places close approximations to the actual words he might have used in his teaching ministry. The ancient peoples, both in the Middle East as also in other parts of the world, un-spoilt by the modern recourse to committing everything to writing, had remarkable capacity to remember, to recall, and to repeat.

Third, while John also seeks to build on the major historical events in the life of Jesus, he attempts a more radical reinterpretation of the Jesus tradition that is known to his readers. He takes much more liberty than others in the drawing of a theological portrayal of Jesus, and in so doing attributes to Jesus passages and sayings that are more of a reflection of the faith of the community than words actually said by Jesus himself.

Once we approach John's gospel with this understanding we would be able to better enter into the mystical faith in John's Gospel that has inspired and enriched Christian piety, mysticism and theological explorations through the past many centuries.

The words, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" has to be understood in this context. They are 'true' in the most profound sense to the faith community to which John was writing. But precisely for that reason the words hold no value as proof that Jesus is the "only" way or to claim that there is "no salvation outside Christ." Streams within the Christian tradition may well hold such convictions, but John 14.6 is certainly not the best support to prove such claims.

Exegesis of the Text

The issue does not end there. We need to go further and ask how we might interpret and understand the text of John 14.6. Throughout the Christian history there has been the practice of interpreting the scripture to get at the meaning of the text and to apply it to the context of the people. This practice comes from the Jewish belief that God, having given the Torah to humankind, expects human beings to explore its meaning and significance for their life. The Jewish tradition argues that this is the reason why God created human beings with freedom and intelligence.

This understanding of the relationship between the 'given revelation' and the 'challenge to the human mind to grasp it' is at the heart of the great exegetical traditions within Judaism and Christianity. Even in church traditions that hold theories of inspiration and inerrancy of scriptures, there is preaching that follows the reading of the scripture. The practice of preaching on the word read is an implicit admission that a scriptural text needs to be interpreted so that the 'worlds once spoken might be enabled to speak to us again.' Therefore, whatever position one holds on John 14.6 from the perspective of historical criticism, one still needs to ask how we might *interpret* the saying attributed to Jesus in this passage.

The text in John 14.6 can be interpreted in many ways:

The first is of course to take it as it stands, as an isolated verse, and to argue that Jesus here claims himself to be the way, the truth and the life, and that no one can come to God except through faith in him. This is the most common use of this verse especially for missionary purposes.

It is also possible to interpret this verse to imply, as some have done, that while there are many possible ways to understand and relate to the Reality we call God, one comes to an understanding of God as Abba, a loving parent (Father), through the life and witness that Jesus has offered to God. In other words, in Jesus we come to a dimension of understanding of God, not simply as a personal God, but also as the intimate Abba.

Still another interpretation centers on how we might understand the words "I am". Even if one were to overlook the Johannine use of I AM from the Hebrew Scriptures to give his own Christological assumptions about Jesus, "I am" can have a much richer meaning. Jesus had lived a life that was totally turned towards God and was in solidarity with the poor, the oppressed and the marginalized in his society. He went about with little or no care for material things. He saw wealth and power (Mammon) as the greatest enemy of God and challenged us to live a life that is God-centered rather than Mammon-centered. He refused to compromise the principle of loving God and of loving one's neighbor as though the neighbor was oneself. In his effort to witness to God's universal love for all people, he was willing to take rejection and to be crucified.

In so doing, Jesus, in his person, life and ministry, shows us the way, the truth, and the life. It is in following him, who has shown us the way of love and self-denial, and in accepting the truth that he has told us about our life with God and our neighbours, that we come to grasp the meaning and truth about life and are awoken to a new vision of who God is.

This interpretation links the verse to discipleship. It moves us away from a simple dogmatic assertion about Jesus to a profound spiritual understanding of the text as it relates to his whole life and teachings.

Even though such meditative interpretations of the verse are legitimate, we need to read the verse in context of the whole passage that relates to Jesus' last moments with his disciples and in the wider context of John's Gospel. When we take the whole text together it does appear that John intends to speak of Jesus himself as the way, the truth and the life; the one who leads people to the 'Father'.⁴

How then can we understand the text in the context of religious plurality?

⁴ Cf. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John: John XIII-XXI* -Introduction. Translation and Notes to the Anchor Bible- (New York: Doubleday and Company Inc., 1970) p.637-57.

Theological interpretation of the text.

As said earlier it is common to use John 14.6 to draw the conclusion that God's saving will for the humankind has been revealed only in Jesus Christ and that it is in him alone that all humankind finds its salvation. Such a belief has led to the missiological conclusion that it is the duty of Christians to convert all of humankind to acknowledge Jesus as their Lord and Saviour.

How far are we justified in building such a theological and missiological edifice on the foundation of John.14.6? One should immediately admit that John 14.6 is not the only verse that calls for an exclusive understanding of the Christian faith. There are other verses in the New Testament, both in John and elsewhere that support the position found in this verse.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son ... Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe in him are condemned already" (John 3.16-18)

Peter and John, taken before the High Priest to answer questions about the healing of the man born lame, proclaim:

"There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved" (Acts. 4.12)

The first letter to Timothy (1 Tim.2.3-6) shares the same sentiments of John 14.6. Here Christ is presented as the "only mediator between God and humankind."

How are we to understand such clear exclusive sayings of which John 14.6 is a part?

The context of the sayings

Much of the New Testament material was written in the context of much controversy over the significance of Jesus, whom the early disciples, based on their resurrection experience, claimed to be the long expected Messiah of the Jewish people. Even though Jesus was crucified, building on the experience of the risen Christ and the expectation of his immediate Second Coming, Christians argued that he was indeed the Messiah. But large sections of the Jewish leadership not only disagreed but were also vehemently opposed to this teaching (also to this day). Soon active persecution of the Christians followed (Stoning of Stephen, and Paul's journey to Damascus to arrest Christians). The controversy deepened with the passage of time. In addition, Christians also came under pressure to choose between following Jesus and paying homage to Caesar at the threat of the sword.

It is not surprising that communities under such pressure fortify their faith and counter the opposition with exclusive claims. Almost all the exclusive sayings in the New Testament takes place either in the context of a polemical situation or in the context of writing to prove the validity of a particular theological position over against another. Paul, faced with the opposition of the 'circumcision party', always overstated his case. John, in his attempts to claim Jesus as the Messiah, builds in overt and covert anti-Jewish polemics and exclusive sayings about the significance of Jesus.

The context of power and privilege

We should remember that much of these controversies are in some sense 'internal controversies' because they were taking place within the Jewish community, some of which had become Christian. New Testament writings were written by persons in minority situations to peoples in minority communities that often were under pressure and persecution. This gives a particular character and context to its exclusivism.

However, with the conversion of Emperor Constantine, the Church soon became part of the Roman Empire. Thus, the texts that were once written for the comfort and self-affirmation of suffering minority communities became texts of a powerful majority community. The change of context gave to these texts a new role and meaning. They are now to become verses that defend Colonial hegemony, Christian superiority and intolerance of other ways of believing.

Today, there is a stream of scholarship that advocates a 'Postcolonial' reading of the Bible. This reading of the Bible seeks to expose how the Bible and its interpretation became a tool in the hands of the colonial powers. During the 18th and 19th Century missionary expansion the Bible was used to characterize other religions as 'pagan' and 'false.' Isolated verses from the Bible were quoted to justify apartheid, slavery, subjugation of women, control of the environment, and rejection of other religions and cultures.⁵ In other words, in the hands of the powerful the same verses that gave life to suffering communities became verses that worked against the liberating power of the Gospel.

Given this history, how useful are exclusive verses to build Christian theology and missiology for our day?

Nature of Religious language

There is also a more fundamental issue at stake here, which has to do with the nature of religious language. In all religious traditions faith is born out of intense religious experiences that give some notion of decisiveness and finality to that faith experience. It is, therefore, only natural that all religious traditions make ultimate claims for the founding experience on which the religious tradition is built. The Buddha was convinced that the four Noble Truths to which he was awakened under the Bo tree was indeed the

⁵ See: R. S. Sugirtharajah. *The Bible and the Third World: Precolonial, Colonial and Postcolonial Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2001) p. 244-282.

true nature of reality, and that devoid of such a realization humankind would not free itself from suffering (dukka). Muslims are convinced that God was revealing to Prophet Muhammad, for the last and final time, God's will on how personal, family and societal life ought to be organized. Jewish people believe God's covenant with Abraham and Moses makes them the 'chosen people' to this day.

Many Christians forget that exclusive and ultimate claims are made not only by them but also by other well-meaning and deeply religious people. People of other religious traditions are annoyed and even amused to learn that on the basis of statements in our scripture we have concluded that they would not be 'saved' unless they believe as we do. The Bible belongs to the faith community. It has no authority to people who have not submitted themselves to its authority.

In other words, scriptures are *confessional material*; they are written by people of faith to a community of faith in the language of faith; they witness to our love and commitment to the primary religious experience that has gripped our life; they are internal to the community; they enable us to elevate our faith experience, to celebrate it, and to own it as our precious possession. Within this *internal language of faith* there is a place for exclusivism and claims to decisiveness and finality. Such claims, however, hold validity only within that specific faith community.⁶

But when we use such confessional material to judge the faith of others, to make claims of superiority, or to undermine the religious experiences of others we violate not only other religious experiences but also our own scriptures.

We undervalue and abuse scriptures when we use them in ways that they were not intended to be used.

Nature of the theological task.

But the theological issue raised by the traditional use of the text raises more fundamental questions about our theological task, namely, about the practice of building theological positions based on sections of scripture. Here again, there has been a long debate within church traditions on the 'resources' or 'principles' or 'criteria' for doing theology. Reformation churches often present this issue as the tension between 'scripture' on the one hand and 'tradition' on the other. Methodist tradition speaks about the 'Wesleyan Quadrilateral,' arguing that one has to bring together scripture, tradition, reason, and experience in our theological task. The theologians of the 'third' world have introduced yet another resource, the 'context'.

The Latin American theologians also brought into biblical exploration the concept of the 'hermeneutical cycle', calling for a movement that takes us from the text to the context and back again to the text. Such a cycle, they contend, would help us to see the text from a new perspective. Juan Segundo argues that each biblical text is accompanied by three

⁶ See: George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine, Religion, and Theology in a Post-Liberal Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984) p.16 ff.

'deaths': the writer, the people to whom it was written, and the context that it sought to address are all no more. Therefore the text can become alive again only when it is related to the current context and made to speak to the present reality.

What does all this amount to? It means that theology must arise not from isolated verses but from the total biblical message. And it has to relate to our present experience and context and help us discern the challenge of the Gospel for our day. We would distort the biblical message when we build Christological or Missiological theological positions from isolated verses. For example, Peter's words, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts. 10. 34-35), taken in isolation, could be used to argue for an exactly opposite position from John. 14.6.

But, does theology has to do with proof-texting or with searching the depths of God's love and purpose for all creation?

Missiological use of John 14.6.

The most common use of John 14.6 is of course in popular missiology. I have been involved in the ministry of interfaith dialogue for over 30 years, and I have never managed to come away from a congregational discussion on interfaith dialogue without being challenged with John 14.6. It is as if people are programmed to raise this verse if there is a discussion on dialogue. Some raise the issue out of genuine perplexity. They have been trained to consider the Bible as the word of God. If the Bible is so clear on the issue we have no alternative, they would say, but to hold the position that those who do not believe in him are 'lost'. Some others quote the verse to argue and justify their own pre-conceived understanding of what constitutes mission, and use the verse to prop up their position.

I find three basic problems with this almost instinctive reaction to use John 14.6 as a text to invalidate the reality of other religions.

First is the larger theological question about God and God's relationship to the world. People of Israel began with belief in Yahweh as a tribal God who was only concerned with affairs of Israel. But soon they found that such a limited understanding of God did not do justice to God. Gradually Yahweh was proclaimed the creator and provider of the whole universe. The confession "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it" (Ps.24.1) is the reflection of the maturing of Israel's conception about God. Very soon Israel had to also think of Yahweh's relationship to other nations and develop the concept of God as the 'Lord of all nations'. It is out of this tradition that Amos is able to address the people of Israel in the name of God with the question: "Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel? Says the Lord. Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir? (Amos 9.7)

In a similar development, missionary movement moved away from seeing salvation as a possession of the church and the task of mission as the sole activity of the church. At the World Mission Conference in Mexico City (1968) the missionary movement adopted the concept of the *Missio Dei*, the 'Mission of God', in which the church's mission was seen as participation in a wider mission of God in the world. Gradually it was recognized that God's world is made up also of peoples who seek God in ways other than our own, and that we have no reason to exclude God's presence and activity in the world of religious traditions.

Even though some within the missionary movement disagreed with this line of thinking, these currents of thought that recognized God's freedom in God's work of salvation led the World Mission Conference, meeting in San Antonio, Texas (1989), to incorporate the following words into its official report: As Christians, "We cannot point to any other way of salvation than Jesus Christ; at the same time we cannot set limits to the saving power of God." It also added that our conviction that God offers salvation to all humankind in Jesus Christ "stands in tension with what we have affirmed about God being present in and at work in people of other faiths; we appreciate this tension, and we do not attempt to resolve it."⁷

Christian exclusivism based on texts like John 14.6 presents an image of God that is too small, too limited, and does not do justice to the biblical image of God as one in whom all beings live, move, and have their being. It does no justice to the God whom Christians believe took human form to embrace whole humanity.

Second, those who adopt this as the primary verse of their missionary understanding fail to recognize the breath and depth of his understanding of mission in the Bible, especially in Jesus' own teaching and ministry. Jesus' own understanding of mission constituted the announcement of the in-breaking of the Reign of God over all life, of solidarity with the poor and the marginalized, of bringing healing and wholeness to the community, of driving out the forces of evil, of challenging people to resist the temptations that come with wealth and power, of resisting false, ceremonial and hypocritical religion, of challenging the abuse of the Scriptures and the Temple, and of proclaiming God's love and forgiveness to all who seek to end their alienation from God and their neighbours. At the heart of Jesus' own mission is the challenge of calling people to self-denial and to life of loving relationship to God and one's neighbour.

It is of course the case that the disciples, following the resurrection experience, gave considerable significance to the life and death of Jesus and were convinced that God was present and active in his life, death and resurrection. It is, therefore, only natural that Christological convictions became part of the message- with the call to 'believe in him.' However, reducing mission primarily to Christological beliefs does violence to Jesus' own understanding and practice of mission.

⁷ Frederick R. Wilson, *The San Antonio Report- Your Will be Done: Mission in Christ's Way* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990), p.32-33.

Third, those of us who have been in close relationships with peoples of other faiths would be aware that John 14.6, however precious it is to the Christians, is the least suitable verse as a rationale for Christian witness to others. Its exclusivism alienates people when used as a mission text. Used in relation to other faiths it would be seen as further proof of Christian arrogance and intolerance of others. Hindus would see it as depicting a defective vision of God and a cheap method of promoting one's religion.

"If Jesus is indeed the Way, the Truth, and the Life," Hindus would say, "It must be borne out in one's inner spiritual experience." It is not an issue for theoretical argument, doctrinal claim, or for judging the spiritual life of other believers.

The Spiritual dimensions of the use of John 14.6

At the end of one of my presentations calling for a new relationship with people of other religious traditions, one of the participants stood and challenged me with John.14.6, insisting that the text clearly states how one might be saved. "No one comes to the Father, says Jesus, except through me."

"Let us hold that text for a moment," I pleaded, "and go to Mark 10 where we have the story of the man who came to Jesus with the question 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' Certainly this is a question related to salvation, and Jesus' answer was that he should sell everything he has and give to the poor, and then come and follow him. Here we have a direct question, 'What must I do to inherit eternal life', and a direct answer 'you must sell everything you have and give to the poor'."

Predictably, the person objected to making the Markan text the primary salvation verse, claiming that this was a one-to-one conversation between Jesus and a rich man.

"But so was also John 14.6" I insisted, "It is presented as an intimate conversation between Jesus and one of his disciples, Thomas, who was troubled by some things Jesus was saying to his disciples as he prepared them for his impending death. In many ways the Johannine text has a much more intimate, confidential and private context than the open and public question that the rich man raised with Jesus on how one might inherit Eternal Life. On what basis do we choose one and not the other as having greater importance to our understanding of salvation?"

My intension was not to win an argument but to make all of us gathered there to realize that all of us, in our human frailty, have learnt to excel in the art of 'selective reading' of the Bible. We mute the challenges that the Bible brings to our own discipleship and tend to use it selectively to suit our purposes.

If we truly intend to give witness to who Jesus is, what he has taught us about God and to God's loving and compassionate relationship to the world, what are passages of the Bible we would choose? The biblical verses we choose and the uses we make of them are intimately related to our own spirituality. For mission is not just activity, but a spiritual

activity. In the way we talk about Jesus we also say something about who we are and what rules our hearts.

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